PRAYER
Psalm 27
Romans 8:24-30

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We are conditioned by our own experience. Our past, our own history, determines to a very great degree, what we feel and think and believe in the present. So the word "prayer" conjures up three images in my mind that I would share with you because one - or all of them - may be common to you as well.

First, the bed-time ritual of a little boy. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Fortunately, I never gave serious theological thought to that prayer as I was praying it. In fact, my brother and I could say it so fast that it sounded like the old Lucky Strike auctioneer on the radio. We were encouraged to add a few lines of own own, but these too became highly ritualized. "God bless Mommy, Daddy" - and the uncles fighting in the war: and even when two of them didn't come home my ritualized prayers still included their names. In any case, that's the first image, and I would guess that you have one to match it.

Second, as an adolescent I used to be a Presbyterian in the morning and a Baptist in the evening. And one of the evening experiences that remains quite clear in my mind is an occassional prayer meeting in someone's home. A group of youngsters were gathered to pray - for an hour, and it was always my misfortune to be seated in a position that left me near the end of the line. This meant that for forty five minutes I sat in sheer panic, organizing my thoughts, structuring my phrases so that my inexperience would not be too conspiciuous, only to discover that every time I had something ready, someone up the line would use it, and I would have to begin from scratch. I concluded rather quickly that this kind of thing wasn't worth what it cost me and I stopped going. But the memory is vivid and it comes immediately to the surface everytime I find myself in a similar situation today.

The third image is the Pastoral Prayer in the worship of my own church. That was my personal waterloo. No matter how hard I tried I could not concentrate. I don't know how long the minister prayed, but it seemed like an eternity and shortly after the first series of Elizabethan adjectives my mind inevitably focused on other more immediate matters. My powers of concentration were not helped by my father, who would sigh a lot

when the prayer got too long, or worse yet, get his railroad watch out of his pocket and begin to inspect - and sometimes even wind it.

In any case, prayer for me was an ordeal to be endured stoically - and sometimes a ritual to be performed for the sake of other people. It never occured to me that my praying or not praying made any difference to anyone at all. I can remember reading "Guns Along the Mohawk" as a boy and finding the preacher's Sunday prayers very amusing. Recently I discovered that passage again: The Rev. Mr. Rosencrantz provided his congregation with a weekly news bulletin and gossip column - all in the name of prayer.

To wit:"O Almighty God, we are thinking right now of Mary Marte Hollaher. She is just fifteen years old, but she is going with one of the soldiers at Fort Dayton. He is a Massachusetts man, O God, and it has come to my attention that he is married in the town of Hingham. I have had her mother and Father talk to her, I have talked to her myself, but she won't pay any attention. We ask thy help, God Almighty, in bringing her back to the path of virture, from which we believe she has strayed pretty far.

O Almighty God, you have brought us an early spring: keep off the frost until the fruit is set. O Lord, the English Codlin, Nicholas Herakimer grafted onto his Indian Apple tree has bloomed this year. May it bear fruit. It is a wonderful example of Thy ways, and worth our going to see, and Nicholas Herkimer will show it to anybody"

At least that's personal and concerned with the immediacies of life. But it is not the kind of praying we do or hear. In fact, it seems that apart from ritualized public prayer such as banquet invocations, and our prayers in worship, the practice of prayer is becoming a lost art. In a recent article in Christian Century the author contends that the practice of prayer is withering away in our time: that even conventional Christians don't seem to be praying anymore. And that the reason is that we are losing the concept of a God who is both personal and almighty. Both ideas have lost currency - that God knows us individually and that God is free to operate when and how he pleases. And the trouble is that without those ideas there isn't a very compelling reason to pray. The author puts it this way: "Unless it is indeed the heart's conversation with a living, personal God, prayer is only wishful thinking" (C.C. 12/22/71), (P. 1493).

For several weeks now we have been thinking about the Biblical doctrines of God and Man. And it all comes to a kind of head in the issue of the relationship between the two.

And so on this Sunday before Lent - when we will turn our attention to the meaning of Jesus Christ - I would like to explore with you the matter of prayer. What is it? What happens? It will not be a 'how to do it" sermon - but rather some probing into the theological and emotional underpining.

Prayer is, I believe, stated in the simplest terms possible, our personal response to God. The words "personal" and "response" are important. Prayer happens with others to be sure - but it is only thru prayer to a degree that it is mine; that it is the expression of my heart, my mind, my emotions and feelings. Prayer begins in the mind - but it is thru prayer only to the degree that it is a response to God: to something he has done or said, or some way I perceive he is imitiating something in my life or in the world at large. Prayer is an act, but it is more than act. It is an attitude, a posture a whole life style. Prayer has been called "practicing the presence of God" which, of course, implies far more than a one-shot grace at meal time.

Malcolm Boyd, an Episcopal priest who wrote a remarkable book of prayers under the title <u>"Are You Running With Me, Jesus?"</u>, tells in the introduction who his own concept of prayer has changed: "Prayer, for me, used to stand as something separate from other parts of life. But I have come to learn that real prayer is not so much talking to God as just sharing his presence... Prayer could no longer be offered to God up there but to God here; prayer had to be natural and real, not phony or contrived; it was not about other things, but these things, however unnatural, jarring, or even socially outcast they might bee.

"God, I discovered, was not an upper-middle-class snob in a private clublike 'holy of holies' or was he an impersonal IBM machine computing petty sins in some celestial office building above the clouds. It came home to me that God was loving in a terribly unsentimental and profound way"

Prayer, then is response to God in life. Life is the grist of prayer; life is the input, the stimulus. And I sense that our first problem is that we have, in fact, removed prayer from life: that we have isolated it from life - geographically and also semantically. We have assumed that there are places for prayer, in church for example, or before meals, or at bedtime: and while it is always necessary, I think, to do this

spacial designation, the counter effect is that prayer gets confined to those spaces and times.

But it is not just a matter of geography. We isolate prayer from life emotionally and semantically. A Lutheran pastor, Edmund Steimle, said it very well:".....we have come to look on prayer as a kind of private church service. It has become bland and proper and lifless. So we are coming into the presence of the Almighty? So, like going to church on Sunday mornings, we dress up our minds, control our feelings and emotions, and try to get into a proper attitude..."

Think of that in terms of vocabulary alone. One of the most common problems with prayer is that we assume that there is a given style and certain words which alone are appropriate. And if we aren't comfortable using Shakesperian English we feel inadequate about our ability to pray. Of course, some of that comes from a sincere desire to be respectful and reverent. An older minister told me once that he could not and would address the Almighty with the personal pronoun you. And if that indicates a personal expression of reverence, fine. But it is ridiculous to assume that God listens only to prayers which include "thees" and"thous". Reverence is never phony. Reverence cannot be created semantically.

Prayer, then, must be ours, personally: it must be our deep response to God's love and grace - or sometimes God's judgement or silence. It must happen in and about life.

I think there are three conditions for prayer: three ways to describe the climate in which prayer can happen. First, <u>Wonder</u> The ability to pray is born in us when we are open to the wonder and mystery of life: when we let our awareness of the world flow freely and sense the newness of birds and flowers and children. The ability to pray is born is us when we learn to experience delight in the uniqueness of another human being: when we learn to be thrilled by the incredible fact that another person loves us and wants us. Prayer begins with our openness to wonder and mystery.

And it proceeds when we learn to take seriously our own deepest feelings. Prayer is more emotional than intellectual, even though we Presbyterians are not. The deeper our feelings run the closer we are to authentic prayer. When tragedy strikes, and from out of our depths is wrenched the plea "O God" - we have prayed - authentically and rightly

and most appropriately. The climate for prayer is established when we get beneath the surface of life, when we learn to feel deeply: when we learn not to ignore or repress those most intimate and profound joys and sorrows of the heart.

The third condition for prayer is honesty. And this, I believe is the most difficult of all. For one of the things our ritualized praying has taught us is that we can't be honest in prayer. We must conform to the established pattern, the prescribed words, ideas and even feelings. We would not think, for instance, of expressing anger in prayer, or impatience with God, or irritation. We don't ordinarily think of prayer as the vehicle for expressing our own religious doubts. And yet, those things happen regularly in the Biblical examples of prayer. Listen to Job: "I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God." Or Jeremiah "Lord, thou hast deceived me - cursed be the day on which I was born...cursed be the man who brought the news to my father. "Read the Psalms for an example of honest prayer. Again, Malcolm Boyd," I can no longer conceive of lying to him in proper Old English or any other stype of speech I feel free to be completely myself with him. In a given situation where I know he is with me, I speak out of that deep trust and love which can spring only from a healthy and authentic freedom'

Wonder, Depth of Feeling and Honesty. Those three define the perimeters of prayer. But in all of this we have been skirting the issue = the real, troublesome question that bothers everyman who allows himself to think about prayer."Does it work?" Does it matter? Does anything happen which would not have happened if we had not prayed?" I do not presume to be able to answer that sufficiently in a few brief minutes, because I have the feeling that it just may be the most important question we ever ask. I would, however, lay before you two ideas and a confession, because when all is said and done our position on prayer is always confessional rather than doctrinal.

The first idea is that God is: that he exists - not in a heavenly closet but in life: that he is, in fact, Almighty: that is to say, absolutely and utterly free: and that the Bible is correct when it affirms that he is personal: that he knows you and me - our needs, our strengths, our weaknesses: that he loves us and wants for us in a way that can only be compared with our fathers' love and wanting for us.

The second idea is that life is open and not closed. That things are not determined for us ahead of time, that God and we-together-open or close the doors of life: that there is always hope in the future, and that God comes to us in and through the common things of life.

Given those two ideas it begins to make very good sense to be in conversation and dialogue with God.

Confessionally, I believe without hesitation that it does matter whether or not we pray. Let me hasten to add, however, that there is nothing so dishonest and inauthentic than praying for something we are not personally committed to. Peace for instance. It makes no sense whatever, to me at least, to pray for Peace unless we are doing something about it: or for our hungry neighbors or for racial justice or for reconciliation in the world. Praying must be honest - and honesty is prescribed by the degree to which our words are reflected in our behavior.

Somethings happen always when we pray. To pray for another person, I believe, is to become sensitive to his needs, his hurts, his personhood in a very special way. To Pray for another person is to extend my life into his in a way words cannot accomplish. That always happens.

To pray honestly is be in touch with ourselves in a new and intimate and healthy way. We know ourselves differently when we pray. That always happens to.

I believe that God loves all men: and I cannot bring myself to believe that God treats one man differently because I have prayed for that man. and conversely, that God withholds his love because I have not prayed for the man.

And so the intellectual quandry. You can't prove that anything happens as a result of your prayers. nor can you prove the reverse.

And at this point we move from doctrine to confession: from ideas to faith. We trust that somehow, mysteriously, miraculously, God does work through our prayers. St. Paul told the Romans "We do not know how to pray" and then - "The Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." And if I can make any sense out of that it is that God wants us to pray - that his spirit is with us as we pray, that he helps us to pray and prays with us - and that you and I are called to look that mystery

and then bring to our God our intercessions for others, our petitions for ourselves - in deep faith and trust.

Prayer is childish - and childlike: it is for those who know that the God who is Almighty and Personal is, in our Lord's own words, our Father. AMEN

Father, help us to pray: through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN